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Viewing cable 09PANAMA799, President's Top Advisor Affirms Security is GOP's Biggest

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09PANAMA799	2009-10-23 18:04	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Panama

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/26/112845/cables-offer-dim-view-of-president.html>

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S E C R E T PANAMA 000799

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2029/10/23

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: President's Top Advisor Affirms Security is GOP's Biggest Challenge, Requests US Help in Organizing Response

REF: PANAMA 626; PANAM...

S E C R E T PANAMA 000799

NOFORN

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2029/10/23

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: President's Top Advisor Affirms Security is GOP's Biggest Challenge, Requests US Help in Organizing Response

REF: PANAMA 626; PANAMA 699; PANAMA 639

CLASSIFIED BY: Barbara Stephenson, Ambassador, State, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: President Ricardo Martinelli's most trusted advisor, Minister of the Presidency Jimmy Papadimitriu, has appealed to the Embassy to assist him in focusing the president's attention on security issues and bringing order to the GOP's chaotic security policy apparatus. Papadimitriu lamented Martinelli's limited attention span and the infighting among senior GOP security officials, at a time when skyrocketing crime and drug trafficking are threatening Panama's future stability and prosperity. He acknowledged that the president's preoccupation with political wiretaps had sidetracked more serious GOP security efforts, and he asked the Ambassador to meet regularly with Martinelli to give him the USG's views on security directly from the source. End Summary.

¶2. (S/NF) During an October 21 meeting with Ambassador, DCM and PolSec officer, Papadimitriu said he had come to realize that citizen security is the key issue for the Martinelli government, and that failure to address the problem could undermine the GOP's success in other areas and threaten future investment and economic growth. (Comment: This represents serious progress. When we met last month with Papadimitriu to coordinate anti-gang and Darien strategies, he had dismissed rising crime as a perception problem driven by irresponsible media, a view we challenged. End comment) He acknowledged that President Martinelli's preoccupation with obtaining wiretap capability to keep tabs on his political opponents (ref B) had diverted attention from serious action to confront Panama's true security threats. He expressed regret that the wiretap issue had been a source of tension with the Embassy.

¶3. (S/NF) Papadimitriu said he had advised Martinelli to tone down his aggressive public campaign to destroy former president Ernesto Perez-Balladares, and to focus his attention on citizen security. He admitted that he has had limited success in that regard, and that the president was still receiving a briefing first thing every morning from intelligence chief Olmeido Alfaro on the activities of his political adversaries. He observed that Martinelli's hyperactive management style and exceedingly short attention span made it difficult to direct him toward the necessary work of fixing Panama's broken government administrative systems, which are the greatest impediment to security reform.

Everybody and Nobody is in Charge

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¶4. (S/NF) Describing in great detail his frustration with the chaotic state of GOP security policy, Papadimitriu complained that senior GOP security figures -- Vice President Juan Carlos Varela, Minister of Government and Justice Jose Raul Mulino, national police director Gustavo Perez, and intelligence chief Olmeido Alfaro -- were all continually jockeying for power. He said, "Every one of them thinks he is in charge, and everyone has his own version of what the gringos say." Papadimitriu said this situation sowed confusion, because each claimed to have the Embassy's endorsement for their pet projects and each brought Martinelli a different view of the Embassy's positions on security issues.

¶5. (S/NF) The Ambassador told Papadimitriu that this was precisely why she had pressed so persistently for their meeting to take place. She suspected that the hours she and the Embassy security team had been devoting to meeting with their GOP counterparts were not resulting in a clear picture reaching the president., and that she had personally spent many hours briefing GOPncipals and had provided extensive documentation. She assured him that we would continue in that effort.

¶6. (S/NF) The Ambassador explained the Embassy's efforts to provide President Martinelli with some quick wins on security -- chiefly the dismantling of the FARC drug trafficking operation in the

Darien, which we believe is fueling the serious uptick in murders in the capital -- in order to buy time for police reforms that are as necessary as they are tedious. She explained that she had, in the wake of her mid-September meeting with Martinelli (ref C), moved on multiple fronts on the green light he had given her to develop a comprehensive plan of action in the Darien. While she and her team had repeatedly briefed the vice president/foreign minister, the minister of government and justice, and service chiefs, she wanted to be sure she was still acting within the president's guidance.

The USG is Key

¶7. (S/NF) Papadimitriu acknowledged he was very worried about the disarray in the GOP's security team, because he knows that security is far and away the top concern among Panamanians and recent polls show increasing concern that perceptions of citizen insecurity are getting worse. He admitted that, "We are riding on a huge honeymoon" that would soon end, and the GOP's perceived lack of effective action on security could cause grave damage to the president's image.

¶8. (S/NF) As for what to do, he first suggested that the Ambassador join the GOP's regular weekly security briefings. He then suggested the Ambassador meet every week with the president. He then suggested that VP/FM Varela was the best GOP official to coordinate GOP security policy. The Ambassador replied that there were pros and cons to each of these approaches, and suggested Papadimitriu let her know how the president wishes to proceed.

¶9. (S/NF) That evening, the AmbassadoQeceived a BlackBerry chat message from the president stating, "Get Silver [the ringleader of the FARC drug trafficking ring]. You have my blessing. Need to meet every week." The Ambassador replied suggesting blocks of time suitable for a meeting. To cover all the bases, she is hosting VP/FM Varela for lunch on October 23 to review security and other issues. At the request of MOGJ, she will also host the minister and his service chiefs for breakfast on October 28.

¶10. (S/NF) Comment: Effective GOP coordination on security is clearly still a work in progress. Embassy support to this effort will remain robust.

STEPHENSON

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000891

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/17

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: Ambassador's November 25 Meetings with President, Vice President, and Minister of the Presidency

REF: PANAMA 777; PANAMA 829; PANAMA 831

NOVEMBER 10, 2009 BROWNFIELD-STEPHENSON EMAIL

CLASSIFIED BY: Debra L. Hevia, Political Counselor, State, POL;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary/Introduction: The Ambassador and DCM spent six hours in meetings with top government officials on November 25 to work through a number of specific security issues, as well as to agree on a structure for better coordination on security issues. End summary/ introduction.

The U.S. Is Panama's Partner

12. (C) The Ambassador and DCM met first with Vice President/Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Varela and Minister of the Presidency Demetrio "Jimmy" Papadimitriu, after which they all joined President Ricardo Martinelli for lunch. The Ambassador turned to the top concern of Panamanian citizens: security, noting that the Embassy's top priority in Panama is security, and that violence threatens long-term governance and prosperity. She assured the GOP that the Embassy would strongly support both aggressive efforts against traffickers and robust programs to keep youth out of gangs. However, she expressed concern that many initiatives have been stalled due to divisions within the government or a lack of internal coordination, and in the case of the Council for Public Security and National Defense (Consejo), leadership that has worked directly counter to our bilateral information-sharing programs (ref A).

13. (C) The Ambassador detailed the many programs the USG provides to assist Panama on security issues, including NAS assistance, Coast Guard and Navy patrols, Southcom humanitarian and development projects, gang-prevention initiatives, and 30 U.S. federal law enforcement agents working side-by-side with Panamanian counterparts. The Ambassador underscored that Panama does not need to search for a partner on security issues; it already has one.

GOP: No Plan or Leadership on Security

14. (C) Papadimitriu acknowledged the lack of GOP coordination, saying that there is no consensus about security and no plan to address it. He said the Ministry of Government and Justice (MOGJ) was too unwieldy, and that Minister Jose Raul Mulino did not have the full support and confidence of the government, but no one else wanted the job. Papadimitriu added, "We don't have anyone who wakes up thinking about security in the way you do. No one feels accountable or responsible." Martinelli ridiculed Mulino, saying that at Cabinet meetings he often talks for 20 minutes nonstop, with an attitude that he knows more than everyone else because he served in government previously, causing the other ministers to stop listening and start working on their blackberries.

15. (C) The Ambassador asked who the GOP was considering naming as the new minister of security, and Martinelli admitted he had not thought about it, but it would not be Mulino. He said Director of the Panamanian National Police Gustavo Perez wanted to remain in his job, and Martinelli was happy to leave him there. The Ambassador and DCM urged Martinelli to choose a strong manager, who did not necessarily have to be a security expert.

Joint Task Force/Maritime Bases

16. (C) The Ambassador detailed how our efforts to help the GOP stand up a small maritime task force that could operate off the Darien's Pacific coast using existing Panamanian security resources had spiraled into a vitriolic public debate about U.S. involvement in "maritime bases" (ref B). Papadimitriu was dismayed, and asked for a paper detailing the operation that the President could sign off on as a direct order to Mulino and the service chiefs. (Note: DCM provided a NAS-drafted paper the same afternoon, which Martinelli signed.) Papadimitriu had not paid close attention to the bases controversy but nor was he alarmed, as his internal polling showed most Panamanians were not greatly concerned about

the bases. He agreed with the Ambassador and DCM that the GOP needed to have a credible spokesperson on security issues, and coordinate its messaging both internally and (where appropriate) with the Embassy.

Global CST and Israeli Involvement

¶17. (C) The Ambassador expressed concerns about the proposals made by Israeli security company Global CST, citing negative experiences in Colombia and the difficulty of working with Israeli presence in GOP ministries (ref C and D). Varela said the GOP could solve its own problems without relying on contractors. Papadimitriu expressed surprise at the reports from Colombia, as he believed CST had been hired with Plan Colombia funds with the USG's blessing. He said he did not want to do anything to harm Panama's relationship with the U.S. and would ask CST president Ziv to stand down, though he later admitted it would be difficult since CST had spent its own money sending a large team to Panama to complete a survey. In particular, Papadimitriu was receptive to the argument that Panama did not need to buy expensive coastal radars or other hardware recommended by CST. However, he liked CST's ideas about creating a ministry of security and reorganizing the GOP security structure, as well as their suggestion to recruit management talent from the private sector. To sum up, Papadimitriu said he was shocked by the conversation, and would not let Israeli influence damage the U.S.-Panama relationship. Martinelli was similarly taken aback, and emphasized that he did not want to endanger relations with the USG, saying "We don't want to change friends." He said he would call Colombian President Uribe to get the straight scoop on CST.

Matador Judicialized Wiretap Program

¶18. (C) Martinelli asked for additional wiretap assistance, saying the GOP needed to catch ordinary criminals in addition to drug trafficking organizations. The Ambassador and DCM suggested that our judicialized wiretap program could be expanded, but it must still be moved out from under the control of Consejo to preserve the judicial quality of the evidence collected. Given the President's opposition to putting it under the control of the Attorney General, the Ambassador referred to the agreement VP/FM Varela had worked out to move the Matador program under Panamanian National Police Director Gustavo Perez. Martinelli confirmed his agreement with that plan.

Moving Forward

¶19. (C) The GOP and Embassy agreed to continue this on-going dialogue through a bi-weekly security meeting including Varela, Papadimitriu, and Mulino on one side and the Ambassador, DCM, and political-security officer on the other. Martinelli said that he, Varela, and Papadimitriu were the "circle zero" of the GOP, and that no important decisions were taken unless the three of them had discussed it and agreed on a course of action.

Bio notes

¶10. (C) In general, Martinelli seemed more relaxed overall and less aggressive than we have seen him in previous meetings. His general tone was respectful and positive, in contrast with his previous argumentative, drive-a-hard-bargain manner.

¶11. (C) Regarding the recent arrest of his cousin Ramon Martinelli in Mexico on money laundering charges, Martinelli said he was satisfied. If the Mexicans had not arrested him, the GOP had plans to arrest him. He said Ramon had always been a "black sheep" and was sullyng the good Martinelli family name.
STEPHENSON